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Wendy Salmond

Chapman University, [salmond@chapman.edu](mailto:salmond@chapman.edu)

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## Review of Isaak Levitan: Lyrical Landscape by Avril King

### **Comments**

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King, Averil. *Isaak Levitan: Lyrical Landscape*. Third edition. Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, 2011. 159 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Chronology. Select bibliography. Index. £35.00.

AVERIL KING's beautifully illustrated monograph on Russian landscape painter Isaak Levitan (1860–1900) is the first Western study on this important artist. The book was first published to coincide with the 'Russian Landscape Painting' exhibition that opened in Groningen in 2004 and travelled on to the National Gallery in London. For this third edition, the text and illustrations have been expanded and the layout reoriented to a horizontal format more conducive to the landscapes that are its primary subject. That the book has now sold out of its third printing shows how successfully the author has engaged a broad, non-specialist audience in Levitan's life and work.

As David Jackson writes in his Foreword, Levitan was Russia's 'national painter *par excellence*' his haunting landscapes evoking a host of associations — historical, literary, political, social — unique to the Russian experience. Yet he was also very much a man of his time, whose works convey poetic introspection and often a fin-de-siècle melancholy. It is this duality that King captures in her book. Coming from a background in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European painting (her previous book was on the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker), she presents Levitan as simultaneously part of Russian and European art history.

King paints in broad strokes, assembling the most diverse range of references and vignettes to bring Levitan's world to life. The result is both panoramic in scope and kaleidoscopic, even dizzying, in detail. The bare facts of his childhood, in an impoverished Jewish family in Kibarty (misspelled in the text), are set against a lengthy description of Russian serfdom and a history of Lithuania. In following his early years as an aspiring artist at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, we meet both the Russian artists who influenced him (Perov, Savrasov, Polenov) and the Barbizon painters who inspired them all, followed up with a short history of landscape painting in Russia. The text is shot through with details of local colour (the fashions worn at court balls, Dostoevskii's near escape from execution, a short history of Russian music, the urban growth of Vienna) that make for lively, occasionally distracting reading. The goal is not scholarly depth (the author relies almost entirely on English-language sources), but an immersive experience that transports the reader into an entire epoch. Her use of Russian literary and musical parallels will resonate with a broad lay audience, binding Levitan into an already family world of evocative associations; the treatment of his life-long friendship with Anton Chekhov is especially well handled. The writing is lyrical and evocative, with deeply felt descriptions of Levitan's paintings.

What makes the book more than a skilful synthesis of the English-language sources is its ability to situate Levitan within a larger, inclusive history of late-nineteenth-century European painting. Readers familiar with the canonical history of this period will readily appreciate King's efforts to link Levitan with a host of artists whose works may already be familiar: Odilon Redon's pastels, Gustav Klimt's square-format landscapes, the landscapes of the Worpswede and Dachau communities, and especially Claude Monet, whose views of the Seine are interestingly paired with Levitan's Volga paintings. These comparisons often involve a certain amount of imaginative hypothesizing ('It is tempting to think that Klimt and Levitan made each other's acquaintance' p. 114), and sometimes they seem forced, as when comparing the capacity of Monet and Levitan for braving winter weather (p. 89) or the former's love of poplars, the latter's of birches (p. 92). But the larger point that Levitan's paintings express the *Zeitgeist* of his time while remaining quintessentially Russian is persuasively made. It is this quality that endeared him to Sergei Diaghilev and the World of Art group, to which an excellent chapter is devoted. Chapters on the Vienna and Munich Secessions (Levitan exhibited with the latter beginning in 1896) reinforce these aesthetic and emotional affinities.

Those already familiar with Russian art will probably not find new insights on that subject here. And there are points on which one can quibble: Ivan Kramskoi was a founding member of the 1863 Rebellion of the Fourteen and the *Artel*, as well as of the *Peredvizhniki* (p. 58); Russia did in fact participate in the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition (p. 60); the works of Borisov-Musatov and Vrubel had been shown prior to the Pink and Blue Rose exhibitions (p. 144). But the expanded perspective on Levitan and his European contemporaries is truly refreshing, and the general reader will discover a complex, interconnected world in which Levitan is the central, but by no means the only character.

Visual presentation is of supreme importance to this book, and the horizontal format allows for the full-page reproduction of Levitan's works. A small but serious obstacle to absorbing the relationship between text and images is the lack of any figure numbers to guide us, so that much time is spent in locating the image as we read (for example, Repin's portrait of Tretiakov is discussed on p. 64 but illustrated on p. 85, the frontispiece *Deep Waters* is discussed in several places without reference to its location). The inclusion of many works that have appeared at auction in recent years, like the record-breaking *Marsh at Evening*, expands our knowledge of his work, while reminding us of market trends for Russian art. Juxtaposing Levitan's paintings with those by a wide range of his contemporaries confirms his importance to an expanded history of the period, and has surely contributed to the book's popularity and usefulness — few Russian artists have been treated with such insight.

Department of Art, Chapman University

WENDY SALMOND